DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 146 CS 510 333

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TITLE We Had a Dream: Now Let Us Share the Vision.
PUB DATE 1999-07-25
NOTE 7p.; Keynote address given at the Credo for Communication Ethics National Communication Association Summer Conference (Rosslyn, Virginia, July 25, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Ethics; Higher Education; Participative Decision Making; *Policy Formation; Position Papers; *Strategic Planning
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Ethics; *Communicative Intention

ABSTRACT

This paper calls for a credo for communication ethics to be established. The credo will consist of two parts: a description of ethical communication, its importance, and application guidelines; and a statement of beliefs which expound upon the description. The credo will be established using the intellectual capital of communications educators and researchers, as well as the heritage of rhetorical thought and the growing consciousness of the breadth and depth of the communication enterprise and its dominant role in our world. Several guidelines are suggested for the formation of the credo: (1) it must be grounded in respect for the moral worth of each human being and in democracy and democratic values; (2) it must account for the ethical dimension of all communication, for various communication roles and responsibilities, and for the increased power of communication and its consequent uncontrollable nature; (3) it must be offered as suggestion rather than commandment; and (4) it must be broadly applicable. (EF)

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We Had a Dream: Now Let Us Share the Vision.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

WE HAD A DREAM. NOW LET US SHARE THE VISION
Keynote, Credo for Communication Ethics NCA Summer Conference
Rosslyn, VA July 25, 1999
Kenneth E. Andersen, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Thirty-six years ago, August 23, 1963, just a few miles from where we meet today, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. His dream envisioned people of different colors and creeds communicating freely with one another, overcoming the barriers that had separated them. His presentation was grounded in an ethic of respect for the moral worth and dignity of all people.

In these two days we honor that legacy as we seek to establish another legacy, a communication ethics credo. Our coming together is also a result of a hope, a dream, many of us have shared. For me, the dream began when I decided upon the theme of "Communication Ethics and Values" for the 1982 Speech Communication Association Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. Several programs addressed the conference theme and President Frank Dance (1982) made it the subject of his presidential address as I did in my president address (Andersen, 1984). The number of programs stressing ethics increased sharply at ensuing regional and national conferences. The growth in interest in communication ethics resulted in the formation of the Communication Ethics Commission, thanks in large part to the work Jim Jaksa, and the biannual conferences at Gull Lake sponsored by the commission hosted by Western Michigan University. The commission's review of the work of the SCA/NCA to develop ethics guidelines for its boards led commission members to call for this summer conference to develop a credo on communication ethics to parallel the long established, well-regarded *Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society*. A credo on communication ethics in my view is a long overdue contribution of our discipline. Thanks to the work of the Planning Committee; the NCA, particularly Sherry Morreale and Bill Eadie, those who participated in the survey summarized in your packet and your participation in this conference the dream is to become a reality.

WHAT IS OUR TASK?

Our task in the next two days is to produce *A Credo for Communication Ethics* for NCA Legislative Council endorsement as an official policy statement at the November Chicago Convention. That policy statement will come in two parts. The first part is a description of ethical communication: what it is, why it is important, guidelines for its application, and the values that inform it and the credo. The second part is the credo: a system of belief statements explicating the description. The credo will consist of a limited number of robust generalizations enabling individuals in their varied roles utilizing various means in the diverse settings in which communication takes place to identify and practice ethical communication. The credo will be of value to teacher and student, practitioner and critic. The credo is normative, not descriptive of actual practice; it establishes goals not yet realized in many communication efforts. We are not developing a code of ethics for this or other disciplines and associations, individuals or society generally. However, the credo will serve as one test of such codes.

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OUR RESOURCES

The most important resource we have is you, you who have committed time, intellect, energy, travel costs and registration fees to this effort. I am particularly pleased we have participants from a full range of institutions including community colleges and individuals who are outside academia. We have the input of individuals who could not attend whose contributions are in the packets you have received.

We will draw upon the growing amount and sophistication of the thinking, teaching, and writing on ethics in our field, a rich, rich heritage of thought. From its earliest inception, rhetoric has been linked to ethical issues. For Aristotle, ethics, politics, and rhetoric were intertwined: one could not master one without mastering the others. Aristotle's doctrine of choices–that every choice has ethical implications--has shaped the thinking of rhetorical theorists. His concept of ethos (the image of the source) as one—sometimes the most powerful--of three persuasive proofs was based on perceptions of speaker's wisdom, character, and good-will (concern for the audience not just self).

Our fundamentals textbooks in various ways—too often in a list of prescriptions and proscriptions with a narrow focus upon the source—stressed the importance of ethical behavior. As Sam Becker (1999) stressed in his keynote to the joint Southern and Central Communication Associations' Convention this April. "When I entered this field almost sixty years ago, the bulk of the scholarly work that I saw being done had a clear purpose: to improve the quality of people's discourse. To a considerable degree, our field came into being, both in ancient times and in its 19th and 20th century reincarnation, for that very purpose. . . . The goal, tacit or overt, was to develop models that others could follow and thus improve their communication skills. And by improving their skills, communication scholars believed, people would improve the society."

Our field has placed great emphasis upon the responsibility that devolves upon the individual living in a democratic society. Like Isocrates, speech teachers prepared individuals to be active in the decision-making of the polis. For some, the civic responsibility of active participation in a democratic society is the basic rationale for requiring students to take communication courses and to adhere to certain ethical standards.

In recent years we have developed a far richer sense of the domains relevant to communication ethics than the requirements of living in a democracy. We have moved from the speaker-audience relationship to concerns with one-on-one, interpersonal and group, and mass communication. We focus on the full range of mediated communication via newspapers, pamphlets, radio, television, e-mail, the Internet and web pages. We study or develop campaigns whether for charity, for political office, for the environment, for world peace. We are concerned with communication ethics in the workplace, in the legal and medical professions, in the classroom. We live in what some deride as "an age of political correctness" in which sensitivity to the impact of the words chosen, images portrayed, stereotypes held and acted upon are tested for their ethicality and, often, their legality. We are sensitive to the issues in cross-cultural communication as we move into the information age in an increasingly global society.

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As we work we need to be conscious of the breadth and depth of the communication enterprise and its dominant role in our world. The credo needs to be applicable to the full range of communication interactions, all its functions, forms and varieties, as we fashion the credo. I came from a dysfunctional family in which there was little communication and what did exist was often unhealthy. The right to an expressed opinion was vested in the father as had been true for my father's father and my mother's father. The credo must apply to that situation just as it does to a politician's campaign strategy.

SOME ADVICE

Aristotle (sexist that he was, given his society) held that a man had to reach a certain age before he could achieve wisdom. (Age alone I take it, was no guarantee.) Being older than anyone else in this room I will take the prerogative of age to offer some words of advice that you and I are totally free to ignore as we go about our work. But don't say I never told you.

One: We must ground our credo in respect for the moral worth of each human being. As humans, we have rights and correlated responsibilities. Whatever the combination of race, religion, ethnic origin, economic background, status, sexual orientation or political affiliation, each person must be respected as a moral agent. This does not mean that all are going to act responsibly but that they deserve respect for being human. They merit the respect of being asked to behave ethically and to be held responsible for their actions as is appropriate.

Two: We must recognize that the credo is created within a democracy and will be most effective in democratic settings. The communication ethic in a tyranny, whether a nation or a family, may share some of the same ethical guidelines but the rationale may vary. Further, full applications of the principles embodied in the credo would likely result in the destruction of the tyranny. The credo will not be helpful to tyrants, a police state, the close-minded, those who already know the truth that never changes and the truth that may not be challenged.

Three: We must be sensitive to and express the fact that there is an ethical dimension to all communication. Communication involves choice making, conscious and unconscious, thoughtfully and painfully deliberated or habitual and unthinking. Whenever choices are made that affect other human beings, there is an ethical dimension. Whenever we use symbols, including words, there is always a semantic dimension (meaning), a persuasive dimension (I include intent and impact), an aesthetic dimension, and an ethical dimension. Any dimension may be more or less relevant, have more or less valence, but it is there.

Four: We must face the issue of the responsibilities of individuals incur in the various roles they play in communication. Until we accept responsibility for our choices, we cannot function as moral beings. People inevitably play a variety of ever changing and evolving roles in communication. We are speakers and listeners, writer and readers. We choose to participate, we are accidental participants, we refuse to participate. The culture, society, group, family, and couple are affected by our shared and individual communication ethics. In our communication we are simultaneous utilizing and negotiating our communication ethic albeit usually implicitly and tacitly rather than overtly. When must we speak out at grave personal risk? What is my responsibility to do something about the child abuse next door, the hate monger at

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my door? How much of their sex history do partners own one another and what circumstances change those obligations? What should I demand of or owe to the media, politicians, my boss, my subordinate in terms of why, what, how they or I communicate or don't communicate? How do we balance the sense of responsibility owed to family and friends with that owed to strangers and antagonists?

Five: We must recognize the increased power of communication and the increased inability to control that power. In one sense the Greek rhetor addressed all those with power when he spoke in the Senate. Those that mattered were there. Power is much more diffuse and complex in today's society. Think of the power of CNN as it becomes the information source for the globe. Think of the power of the hacker invading the computers at the pentagon, computers governing the electric power grids, computers containing our personal medical or financial records, or creating an unstoppable computer virus because, using all the wisdom of her 16 years, she can. The Greek rhetor could be and was held accountable by his fellow rhetors. Who can we hold accountable? How can we hold them accountable? Events past and present here in Washington give these questions special resonance.

Six: We must not get hung up on enforcement. I suggest we treat our credo as an invitation for everyone to join in a social contract. The credo functions as a "social contract." People are asked to accept it and be bound by it because they should do so. We test that contract by acting in accordance with its principles and enforcing it upon self and others until the refusal or failure to do so is justified. This is not offered as a "law" to be enforced in terms of an explicit penalty and system for adjudication. This is one difference from the many specific codes of conduct of various groups.

Seven: We must not focus on minutia, we are seeking robust generalizations. What would we working behind Rawls' (1971) veil of ignorance with no knowledge of our religion, nationality, abilities, profession, status or class, particular setting or issue agree upon as desirable communication ethics? The generalizations should have broad application and be relevant across numerous domains because we envision the credo to have the broadest possible use and value. It is not for this group, our profession, our disciplines, it is for all. We cannot provide a rank ordered priority listing. We cannot and should not replace the need for the individual to engage in meticulous moral reasoning in the tough cases.

A CODA

At Gettysburg Abraham Lincoln said, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here." How wrong he was. It is my hope that our disciplines, our professions, our colleagues, our students, indeed, the world will note and remember the Communication Ethics Credo for the value it can render them. So, let us be about our work guided by our two excellent facilitators Isa Engleberg and Diana Wynn.

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ENDNOTES

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